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ABSTRACT

A review of literature on the learning processes and potential of adult students of English as a Second Language, not literate in their native language, looks at research in the following areas: (1) the differences between children and adults in language learning; (2) the effects of previous formal education on second language learning; (3) the effects of literacy on cognition; (4) the transfer of skills within and across languages; (5) the effectiveness of different types of instructional materials or approaches for literate as compared with non-literate individuals; (6) simplification and selection of texts; (7) meaning- versus form-centered instructional approaches; and (8) competency-based curricula. Research is recommended that focuses specifically on the education of illiterate adults. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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APPROACHING THE NEEDS OF ADULT ILLITERATE ESL STUDENTS

A Master's Research Paper

submitted to Dr. Richard Lutz
of the Graduate School of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Thirty-nine Credit M.S. Degree

by

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Approaching the Needs of

Adult Illiterate ESL Students

Very little is known about the learning processes of adult illiterates and even less about adults learning to read in a second language. But in the United States, attention is becoming focused on the problem of teaching literacy to adult ESL (English as a Second Language) learners. This is largely due to the influx in recent years of great numbers of refugees and immigrants with little or no formal education or literacy in their native language. These illiterate ESL learners, unlike their children (whose sole immediate task is to integrate socially and perform in a school setting), come to the classroom with a variety of pressures and responsibilities, as well as an immediate need for the minimum language and literacy skills required to obtain food and shelter for themselves and their families.

Many of these adults attempting to learn English can be classified as: 1) preliterate--those who have had no previous contact with a print environment, some whose native language has no written form; 2) non-literate--those who have no reading or writing skills in any language because of lack of education rather than lack of a print environment; 3) semi-literate--those who have minimal literacy skills and little or no formal education in their own language; or 4) non-roman alphabetic--those who may be literate in a native language whose writing system does not use a roman alphabet.

Educators concerned with the pedagogy of ESL adult illiterates of these kinds disagree on many issues, particularly whether to teach literacy in the native language prior to the target language. Whether classroom instruction of illiterate adults is of any benefit is another issue. Is "regular ESL" helpful? If not, what approach should be taken with these students? What sequence

should be followed in teaching prerequisite literacy skills, listening/speaking skills, and reading/writing skills?

This group of ESL learners has been largely ignored in the past and thus very little research has been done concerning how the SLA (Second Language Acquisition) process differs for illiterate or exactly how it is accomplished by adults versus children. Educators have sometimes cited research in other areas to support their perspectives.

It is my intention to review in this paper the research which may be applicable to this type of learner. Some generalizations can be made concerning the learning abilities of adults versus children and recent studies specify some adult/child differences in SLA. Research studies regarding the cognitive effects of native language literacy versus formal education also have implications for the expected outcome of formal instruction in ESL. Most educators of adult illiterates, those who have based their techniques of theory, have used research on how English-speaking adults or ESL learners literate in their L1 (first language) learn to read in English or on how children learn to read and acquire ESL. It is important to examine all this literature in order to determine what is relevant and useful for educatiors who must make decisions about programs for these students.

In the United States, formal education has generally been perceived as a task for childhood and adolescence; adults are often seen as somehow less suited or capable of learning than children. Various differences in learning capacity and style have been noted in comparing adults to children. These differences impose limitations and also may offer some advantages to adult learners.

Adult educators have noted physical differences between adult and child learners which are relevant because they indicate limitations on adult

learning abilities. According to Hand, adults experience a gradual loss of visual acuity in dim light, a narrowing of visual field, and a slowing of adjustment time when shifting between light and darkness (1973, 108). Further, Hand notes that hearing efficiency declines with age while reaction time to audio stimuli increases (109). Bowren & Zintz note that motor abilities peak at 20 to 25 years and decline with age (1977, 28). Hand also adds that older adults learn less under conditions of mild bodily discomfort and are more frustrated by lack of success than younger learners (118). These physical changes can effect the classroom performance of adult students and are therefore noteworthy.

Many people believe that intelligence as well as some physical ability declines with age. Famous studies by Edward L. Thorndike (1928) of adult intelligence showed that the peak of learning ability is age 20 to 25, after which it declines steadily (qtd. in Bowren & Zintz, 56). Thorndike's data was based on speed of performance. Irving Lorge (1940) qualified these findings by noting that while there is a decline in the speed of learning correlated with increasing age, intellectual power is not reduced (qtd. in Hand, 114). Lorge attributed a decreasing rate of learning to losses in visual acuity, auditory acuity, and reaction time (qtd. in Bowren & Zintz, 57). Weber confirms that "the time needed to perform certain tasks increases with age but the level of performance does not change significantly through adulthood" (1975, 156).

These findings suggest that although adults may have physical limitations that increase with age, adult learners should not be any less capable than children (providing these limitations are given consideration in classroom management). In regard to SLA, however, adults are thought to have some serious disadvantages in terms of level of performance.

Dulay, Burt & Krashen note that children are generally superior to adults in acquiring the phonology of an L2 and are ultimately better language learners (1982,94). The superior ultimate attainment of child L2 learners has been related in the past to "...neurolinguistic processes such as ongoing localization of language during childhood, incomplete lateralization during childhood or more general notions of brain plasticity." But Snow dismisses these explanations and claims a greater importance for the role of social interaction (1983,145).

Lightbown suggests most adult language learners never reach native-like mastery of an L2, possibly because acquisition stops as soon as an acceptable functional communicative level is reached (1985,179). Dulay, Burt & Krashen explain that adult/child differences may be due to affective factors or differences in the language environment of children and adults. Adults may filter out more language input or not even receive as much concrete input as children do (1982,95).

While adult students may have some disadvantages in SLA, studies would appear to indicate that adults may have some initial advantages over children. Krashen, Long & Scarcella reviewed a large number of studies examining the relationship of age to SLA and made these conclusions:

> Adults and older children in general initially acquire the second language faster than young children (older is better for rate of acquisition) but child second language acquirers will usually be superior in terms of ultimate attainment (younger is better in the long run) (1979,118).

One study by Snow & Hoefnagel-Höhle (1978) examined subjects ages 3 1/2 to 55 years. All were native English speakers living in the Netherlands. Tests were administered at different intervals which reflected different

aspects of skill in Dutch. The results showed that children's language learning ability increased with age up until the teenage years, that adolescents did better than adults, but that nonetheless the adults outstriped the young children in rate of acquisition. Adults were especially strong on rule acquisition (morphology, syntax, and metalinguistic ability) and on vocabulary (Snow 1983,142-43).

This study supports Ausubel's assertions that adult L2 learners have some advantages over children such as a larger native language vocabulary and conceptual framework and the ability to make conscious and deliberate use of grammatical generalizations (1964,421).

Since teenagers appear to share these advantages, Dulay, Burt & Krashen explain the age at which this capacity for metalinguistic awareness develops and also the adult/teenager initial advantages in rate of learning as resulting from cognitive differences occurring at the onset of what Piaget termed "formal operations" when an individual is able to manipulate abstract ideas (1982, 92). Krashen elaborates:

> The ability to think abstractly about language, to conceptualize linguistic generalizations, to mentally manipulate abstract linguistic categories, in short, to construct or even understand a theory of a language, a grammar may be dependent on those abilities that develop with formal operations (1982,208)

Krashen's use of the "formal operations theory" to account for adult initial advantages in SLA does not examine the causes for the onset of Piaget's formal operations, though Krashen admits that formal operations do not occur in all individuals. This is confirmed by Ginsburg & Opper who state:

> In western cultures, some adolescents do not seem capable of the formal operations; in some non-western cultures, the

> formal operations seem to be completely absent, even in adults (1979,201).

What relationship exists between the formal operations stage and formal education or literacy? This question has not been addressed by Krashen or other SLA researchers.

In the discussions about adult/child differences no attention has been given to the level of formal education of individuals in relation to age nor to the literacy skills of either adult or child subjects. There is an underlying assumption that older individuals will be literate and will have completed a formal education; that by virtue of achieving adulthood they will all have reached a similar cognitive standing. The fact that learning ability of children (in terms of rate) increases with age is seen as a function of years rather than as a function of years of formal education (and accompanying literacy skills). How do uneducated or illiterate children and adults fare in relation to one another based only on age? Do <u>age</u> differences really determine rate and eventual attainment, or is it years of education/literacy training?

Present research does not answer these questions and thus cannot offer many insights into the advantages or disadvantages of adult illiterate L2 learners. Yet, adults of all kinds have generally been lumped together in prescriptions concerning language instruction. For example, Krashen & Seliger state:

> For adults, formal instruction is in general of more benefit for second language learning than is exposure to and use of the second language in 'natural' situations (1975,173)

In addition, Long reviewed research studies examining the role of instruction versus exposure for adults as well as children. Of the eight adult studies

cited, five involved well-educated (and presumably literate) subjects, and the three others gave no indication of previous education of the subjects. Nonetheless, Long makes a sweeping conclusion:

> Instruction is good for you, regardless of your proficiency level, of the wider linguistic environment in which you receive it and of the type of test you are going to perform on. Instruction appears especially useful in the early stages of SLA and/or in acquisition-poor environments (1983,379-80).

That instruction would benefit adult uneducated or illiterate L2 learners cannot be inferred from this evidence. In fact, evidence which seems to contradict these conclusions is found in a study of Hmong tribesmen learning ESL in a refugee camp in Thailand.

Robson (1982) investigated the effects of previous formal education and of Hmong literacy in a roman alphabet on students in a three month program of ESL and Cultural Orientation. This was an acquisition-poor environment for exposure to English, since the classroom instruction was the only available input for students. Four categories of students were involved in the study: those not formally educated and non-literate; not educated but literate; educated but non-literate; and educated as well as literate. In this way, the effects of formal education could be distinguished from the effects of informally acquired native language literacy.

The study had 114 original registrants but the dropout rate eliminated about half of these, others were eliminated from the study by the researcher because of having acquired English prior to the study. The final sample therefore contained only 44 subjects. Five tests were administered at the beginning and end of the investigation for listening, reading, and oral production in

English and reading and writing in Hmong. The classes were taught by American teachers of varying amounts of experience. No indication of the methodology or instructional materials used by these teachers is given nor information as to whether different classes were taught using the same basic materials and techniques.

The results of the study show that those who had literacy skills in another language were the more successful language learners; that literacy was just as much an advantage as previous classroom experience; and that the non-literate students learned very little, if any, English from their classroom experience (212). Robson also notes that "some of the best non-native English spoken in camp...had been learned informally"(213).

Robson's study is important because it is the first which systematically explores and reports data concerning the learning capacity of adult illiterates in a classroom setting and the lack of success of formal ESL insturction for this group. It also implies that informal exposure may actually be of most value to this type of learner. If the results of this study are taken at face value, then the conclusions of Krashen & Seliger (1975) and Long (1983) mentioned earlier must be revised. Lightbown's generalization of research findings is more to the point:

> There is considerable evidence that the second language acquisition process is at least partly the same for children and adults. Some adults--especially those who are literate and accustomed to formal instruction--can also benefit from formal instruction in the language, but they are not limited to it simply because they have passed the age of puberty (1985,176).

The Robson study is of further interest because it contributes to the

discussion of the role of literacy in the success of SLA. Many educators have argued that for adults (as well as children) L1 literacy promotes SLA. Gudschinsky of the Summer Institute of Linguistics takes the position that a first priority in reading and using an L2 is mastery of basic reading skills in the L1 (1973,139). Those who support this point of view have argued from different perspectives: philosophically, in terms of literacy as a means of empowerment for minority peoples, allowing for native language maintenance and transmission of culture; pedagogically, as a method for establishing print as a meaningful form of communication and increasing the self-esteem of individuals; and theoretically, as the most effective way of developing cognitive abilities which would then transfer to the learning of the L2.

The theoretical issue of the effect of literacy on cognition has been a topic of great debate. Scribner & Cole indicate that some psychologists believe that literacy effects "the emergence of general mental capacities--abstract thinking, for example or logical operations--rather than specific skills" (1978,451). In that case, Krashen's "formal operations theory" would predict that literacy would give an advantage in rate of acquisition to adult L2 learners, since literacy would indicate logical operations.

Scribner & Cole were interested in examining the role of literacy in and of itself versus formal instruction in cognitive performance. By studying the Vai of Liberia, who are known for the syllabic writing system of their own invention, Scribner & Cole were able to examine the effects of literacy passed on without the benefit of professional teachers. Tasks were set up to test for improvement of cognitive performance due to Vai literacy versus formal education. They found:

> Improved performance was associated with years of formal schooling but literacy in the Vai script did not substitute for schooling. Vai literates were not significantly

> different from non-literates on any of the cognitive measures (1978,453).

Also, literacy gave no advantage in competencies such as abstraction, verbal reasoning, and metalinguistic skills (457). These competencies are the very ones which Krashen (1982) claims would indicate the onset of formal operations. Therefore, Scribner & Cole's evidence does not necessarily link literacy with formal operations, and thus with advantages for rate of acquisition in L2 learning.

Nonetheless, Scribner and Cole's results do show that literate Vai with no formal schooling transfer some cognitive skills involved in reading to other tasks which are closely related. This is evidence which implies that cognitive skills necessary to reading in one language may transfer to reading in another language. A negative corollary implication might be that if the writing systems of two languages are dissimilar (i.e. different in orthography) native language literacy in one language may not facilitate learning to read in the other.

Hatch attempted to examine claims of a transfer of skills from L1 to L2 in reading. She reviewed studies involving children as subjects which suggest that reading should be introduced in the native language first. Hatch indicates that this research is not sufficient or definitive enough to warrant conclusions (1979,135). It is even less conclusive in the case of adults.

Robson's study and its results are more directly applicable to the situation of adults. They are also interesting in light of the Scribner & Cole findings. Robson says:

> The subjects who could read Hmong but who had never been to school did not score significantly lower on the tests than did those who had had formal education. Literacy in Hmong provided subjects with as much of a 'leg up' in

> their efforts to learn English as formal classroom experience did. It is impossible to tell whether the advantage is in native-language literacy, or in literacy in a roman alphabet (1982,212).

Adult illiterates were the subject of a recent study by Burtoff who examined the effects of native language literacy in Haitian Creole (HC) on ESL proficiency. Unlike Robson's subjects, isolated in a refugee camp, the Haitians of Burtoff's study had ample opportunity for exposure to the target language as well as classroom instruction in ESL.

The subjects, Haitians living in New York City, had no more than two years of formal education, were non-literate and had no spoken competency in English. They were divided into two groups: those receiving instruction first in HC then in ESL (in successive 12-week sessions) and those receiving only ESL instruction (for a total of 24 weeks). Of 90 subjects eligible for the study, only 29 are described in the final report. These were pre-tested for HC literacy to determine eligibility for the study and were pre- and post-tested for listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in English. Methodology and materials in ESL were not specified and therefore varied according to the site of classes. Additionally, the teachers were all native speakers of HC with varying degrees of ability in spoken English.

The statistical results of the study were non-significant. However, Burtoff reports that:

> Mean component scores revealed that subjects in the HC Literacy group gained more points in English literacy skills than those in the ESL Only group; this suggests that literacy skills do transfer at least between languages that both employ a roman alphabet (1985,16).

In both the Robson and Burtoff studies, native language literacy is seen as a factor in increased SLA and this is thought to be due to a transfer of skills from the L1 to English. Barnitz has stated that similarities between the orthography, vocabulary and syntax of languages "...play an important role in facilitating or impeding transfer of initial reading skills" (1978,18). But since all the subjects of the studies with native language literacy were roman alphabetic; since there was no control group, it is unclear if roman alphabet is the crucial point of transfer. Neither Robson nor Burtoff can offer any conclusive evidence on this point.

Other results and conclusions of Robson and Burtoff are also in question because of several problems with the studies. In both, the final sample size was quite small. In addition, the training and experience of teachers was not uniform; in the Burtoff study the English language competence of teachers is even in question. Neither study controls nor addresses the issue of what approach is used to teach ESL to these illiterate adults. ESL methodology, syllabus, text, and distribution of time for listening/speaking versus reading/writing skills are not even mentioned by the researchers.

The reality is that in the past (and probably even now) illiterate adult students were given the same kind of instruction that other adult ESL students receive. Often methods and materials are not adapted to this type of learner ESL materials rely heavily on written text and print conventions. According to Hvitfeldt (1985), even those materials which are picture-based (supposedly designed for illiterates) utilize drawings whose symbolic conventions may be unintelligible to preliterates or even non-literates.

Regular ESL classes for adults have often been organized around a grammatical syllabus in the belief that "higher level abstract knowledge of linguistic structure is likely to help adult learners process a second language" (McLaughlin, Rossman & McLeod 1983,153). Illiterate students may be given

grammatical explanations for phenomenon which they may not understand or know only intuitively in their own language.

Issue of materials and approach are very important in defining what a regular ESL class is like and what illiterate students are likely to receive from class sessions. Another issue not addressed by the Robson and Burtoff studies is whether native-language literacy is really the key factor in SLA or if instruction focused on prerequisite cognitive skills necessary for reading (regardless of what language they are taught in) is the causal factor. Some of these prerequisite skills would include: learning that two-dimensional figures can represent speech, that there is sound/symbol correspondence, and learning to discriminate visually between small shapes and to recognize the similarities between machine print and handwritten letter shapes.

Can such prerequisite skills be acquired through the medium of an L2 or must they be taught in the L1? This question is not answered by either study. The Burtoff study would have been more useful in this regard if another control group had been added which was given literacy instruction in English for the same amount of time as those receiving ordinary ESL.

Robson and Burtoff are pioneers in systematic research of the value of L1 instruction for ESL acquisition and should be applauded. Further investigation should also proceed. Yet, it seems clear that in the United States even if L1 literacy is proven to be the key ingredient for optimal SLA, it will be unavailable to most adults. Typical classes are often composed of students who speak a variety of languages unknown to the teacher. Further, some languages have no written form and others use non-roman alphabets which may or may not provide useful transfer of skills. Thus, studies in the area of native-language literacy are presently less than useful to those involved in program design or syllabus planning and even less relevant to educators choosing an approach and accompanying methods and materials.

Lacking relevant research to support any theoretical approach to ESL for adult illiterates, and forced to provide instruction to large heterogeneous groups, teachers have become the "authorities"in this field and methods and materials are being used based on teacher intuitions about what is successful. Teachers have adopted the bottom-up or top-down approaches widely used in reading instruction for children: phonics, linguistic, whole word, or language experience.

With a phonics approach, letters are introduced and taught as discrete sounds which are combined to form words. Reading is seen as a process of translating written letters into spoken sounds. New words are introduced based on their configuration of sounds. A linguistic approach emphasizes patterns of sounds and repetitive recombinations of these patterns. Again the emphasis is on form rather than on meaning. While whole word approaches purport to be more meaning-oriented, they too perceive reading as mastery of discrete units (this time whole sight words to be memorized by their shape and configuration). Words are chosen not for their adherence to phonic form but for their functional value based on high frequency use or necessity to students in specific settings. A language experience approach is more holistic than the others. Whole reading passages (chosen for their comprehensibility to the students) are drawn from the students' own words. Reading is seen as a process of predicting what will be written based on the reader's knowledge of what to expect. Words are chosen on the basis of their familiarity to students, not because of form considerations or their likelihood of reappearing frequently in other contexts.

The situation of ESL literacy educators is not so different from that of those regular ESL program designers who are choosing between grammar/translation, audio-lingual, notional/functional or natural approaches to language learning. Faced with choices between less than perfect approaches, practi-

tioners often spot the shortcomings of these mutually exclusive approaches and opt for an eclectic approach.

In the "Forum" article of Passage (a journal of refugee education) ten ESL literacy specialists write as experts about their educational practices. While each describes the relative merits of various approaches, none give any evidence (other than testimonial) of their claims that these approaches work for adult learners. Further, very little is said as to how listening/speaking ESL components work together with reading/writing components. Literacy educators have assumed the role of reading teachers and expect that students will receive regular ESL (whatever that means) before entering literacy classes. That "regular ESL" classes may not be of any benefit to them until they are literate does not seem to be an issue.

Educators have looked to reading theorists for guidance in making practical choices. Many believe that knowing what "good readers" do will help them to understand the difficulties of illiterates learning to read in an L2, and thus help to identify pedagogical strategies for approaching reading instruction for these students.

Hosenfeld studied the strategies of successful and non-successful L2 readers. Based on the subjects' self reports of how they read, she concluded:

> Generally, the successful reader keeps the meaning (context) of the passage in mind as he reads; he reads (translates) in broad phrases; he skips the unknown words and uses the remaining words in the sentence as clues to their meaning (1977,121).

Goodman (1967) describes reading as a "psycholinguistic guessing game" and has identified three kinds of input available to readers (graphic, syntactic, and semantic) which assist good readers in making predictions about the content of

a text and help them confirm their hypotheses. Others have used Goodman's terms to describe what they have observed.

Malicky & Norman (1982), in a study of sixteen English-speaking adult illiterates, found that the group which did not progress in reading achievement relied on graphic cues whereas the more successful group used syntactic cues. Neither group relied on semantic cues (as good readers would). Hatch (1979) reviewed studies of adult ESL readers (presumably all literate in their L1). She concluded that semantic cues are used more effectively and syntactic cues seem to get in the way. Clarke (1980) concurs but explains that limited control over the L2 "short circuits" even the abilities of a good L1 reader to make use of semantic rather than syntactic cues. How then can an individual learning to read for the first time approach the problem of reading in an L2?

Logically, it would seem then that adult ESL beginning readers who are also illiterate in their L1 can neither make use of syntactic cues nor semantic cues. This view is confirmed by Bell & Burnaby (1984) who explain that these illiterate students cannot make use of knowledge of print conventions in order to predict content based on format, in addition they cannot make use of orthographic, syntactic or semantic cues as easily as an L1 speaker. While a native speaker may guess one unknown word, ESL students have too many unknown items to make guessing feasible. Also, English syntax will not help them in making predictions. In the end, they rely heavily on decoding orthographic information and are likely to have problems with short term memory overload. "In their focus on sounding out words they severely limit their ability to get meaning from the text" (13-14). Bell & Burnaby suggest that if prediction is the basis of good reading, then texts should be provided in which syntax and vocabulary is very familiar.

Research by Rudell (1965) on constructing written text based on speech showed that it is easier to read a text which resembles a person's natural

speech than to read a passage which has no correspondence (qtd. in Hatch, 1979,141). Therefore, illiterate adult ESL students might be more successful in reading texts which were written to reflect the syntax of their natural speech.

While attempts have been made to simplify texts for adult illiterates, they have not been very successful. Rigg & Kazemek are very critical of them:

> These materials typically have very short reading passages most were created according to some readability formula which means that both vocabulary and sentence length are controlled. The problem with such short tightly controlled passages is that they are not long enough for the reader to find out by reading the first part how to predict what is in the later parts (1985,726-27).

Simplifications based on some readability formula do not yield texts which reflect the syntax of natural speech of ESL learners. Harber notes that in the past, readability formulas incorporating word lists, syllabic counts, and sentence length did not take into account the syntactic complexity of sentences at all (1979,15). New formulas are being developed and validated based on the difficulty of grammatical structures for children who are native speakers of English, but they may not be useful for adult ESL students.

Finding reading selections which reflect the natural language of ESL learners is difficult because the control of the target language of each individual is different and not static. L2 learners create a systematic interlanguage which is often characterized by developmental errors as well as errors due to transfer from the L1 (Lightbown 1985,176). One problem with writing texts in the students' interlanguage then is accurately identifying an individual's interlingual stage. Pienemann & Johnston have made some interesting progress in identifying such stages.

German SLA studies by Meisel, Clahsen & Pienemann (1981) indicate that there is a set pattern to the way some linguistic structures are acquired by L2 learners. Johnston has also pursued studies of SLA sequences, this time in English. His assumptions are that:

> Learners are constrained in certain ways as to how they can learn--that is they have some kind of internal syllabus which plays a central role in their learning, as a result of which there are developmental sequences to be observed in many domains of learner language...that certain kinds of sequence are more 'binding' than others (1984,4)

Pienemann asserts that formal language teaching can build on the learners' natural SLA sequence, predict their next stage of development and teach to that level (1984,9). His research shows that teaching too far beyond an individual's level will not assist in SLA but that if instruction is directed at the level just above what has been mastered, movement through the SLA sequence can be enhanced. He states:

> Provided the learner is at the appropriate acquisitional stage--instruction can improve acquisition with respect to (a) the speed of acquisition, (b) the frequency of rule application, (c) the different contexts in which the rule has to be applied (1985,37)

Pienemann specifies however that this evidence is so far related only to children, "since the cognitive structure in adults and their memory capacity is quite different from that of children." He asserts that processing mechanisms may be the same for both adults and children but admits that instruction may effect adults differently than children (40).

Pienemann believes that teaching must be learnable or it will be counterproductive. Currently, he is working with Johnston in attempting to create a

"learnable syllabus" based on their research findings concerning English SLA. Those findings have so far only been published in very sketchy ways (see Johnston, 1984). They are also attempting to construct a test which would indicate an individual's interlingual stage (Pienemann 1984,26-27). Such information, if it included adults as well as children, might be useful in determining the content of "regular ESL" classes, but also the complexity of reading passages and their suitability to specific L2 learners. Johnston has pointed out that the grading of current ESL texts is "wildly out of synchronization with natural grading" (1984,13-14). Texts graded for phonic complexity or according to existing readability formulas must be even more "out of synch".

Recent comments by Krashen would indicate that he does not consider the complexity of texts to be an issue in literacy. In a speech given for LSA/TESOL at Georgetown (July 1985) Krashen dealt with the topic of reading exposure as a means of developing literacy. He posited that "reading exposure" as accomplished by sustained silent reading, self-selected reading, a print environment, and being read aloud to, all promoted better reading, and that focus on form in the teaching of reading (specifically phonics) was not useful in the long run because it directed the reader's attention to decoding sound to the exclusion of predicting meaning. These means of exposure do not give any indication that materials readers are exposed to will be at an appropriate and readable level.

Krashen bases his assumptions about reading on studies of children reading in their L1, yet he applies his conclusions to all readers in making his sweeping generalizations. He implies that these generalizations are applicable to L2 readers by extending his "input hypothesis" in SLA from oral communication to reading.

Krashen's input hypothesis is at odds with the idea of any kind of structural syllabus (such as the one which Pienemann & Johnston propose). He states that "comprehensible input delivered in a low filter situation is the only

'causal variable' in SLA" (1981,57). He does not believe direct teaching is of any value unless it is the only source of comprehensible input available to a learner. In extending this hypothesis to reading he states:

> Language acquisition theory predicts that the conventions of the written language will be acquired in only one way--through comprehensible input in the written language, or reading exposure (forthcoming,3).

Yet Krashen does not offer any means of assessing the comprehensibility of texts and does not even speak to the issue of unavailability of suitable materials for adult ESL students learning to read.

Thus, while studies of reading theorists have seemed to indicate that meaning-centered approaches may be more effective than form-centered approaches, their claims have not been supported adequately by research and have not focused on the specific population of students whose needs we are considering. Presently, at best, reading theorists can only offer clues to choosing approaches to reading instruction for adult illiterates and SLA researchers are not yet able to support their perspectives on syllabus development for ESL instruction of adults. In the meantime, what is needed is a curriculum design which takes into account the dual syllabus of adult ESL illiterates. SLA and literacy skills need to be addressed in a unified theoretically-based design. Sufficient research has not yet been done, but models may at least be proposed and tested out based on existing SLA and reading research. At least a framework could be created from which to approach the problem of choosing approaches; a framework flexible enough to be adapted as relevant research becomes available.

Richards suggests a starting point in curriculum planning should view language learning in terms of the development of standards of proficiency and should therefore identify educational, occupational, and interactional tasks which learners need to perform in the target language (1985,21). The ABE (Adult

Basic Education) movement is also concerned with identifying functional skills necessary specifically to adult in recognition of the tendency of adult students to view education in terms of what they themselves (for practical purposes) need, rather than in terms of the subject matter being offered. In 1971, the Department of ABE in the United States commissioned a four-year study--the Adult Performance Level (APL) study--which generated competencies later used to construct an ABE curriculum.

The Center for Applied Linguistics, in their report on Teaching ESL to Adults (1983), advocates the use of APL competencies in planning an adult-focused ESL curriculum. They define "competency" as a "task-oriented goal written in terms of behavioral objectives, which includes language behavior" (9).

A competency-based education (CBE) standard of proficiency identifies functional tasks and provides a means of assessing performances. It shifts from a focus on grammatical or alphabetic forms to a focus on tasks which might require the manipulation of these structural language components. It also allows for flexibility in syllabus and methodology as research evidence proves or disproves learning theories.

Similar to CBE is Long's model of "task-based language teaching" which he describes as a "psycholinguistically based, integrated solution to both syllabus and methodological issues in second language teaching" (1985,88-89). Long believes that the ordinary tasks which an individual must perform in his/her particular field should be identified in a needs analysis, a syllabus should be constructed toward the teaching of these tasks, and language activities necessary for their performance should be the focus of the language classroom. The ability to accomplish these tasks would be the criterion for assessment of the students (89).

One program in the Washington, D.C. area which makes use of a CBE curri-

culum with ESL literacy students is organized similarly to Long's "task-based teaching model. The Refugee Education and Employment Program (REEP) at Wilson School, an Arlington, Virginia public school, is a federally funded program. REEP was originally established to assist newly-arrived refugees by providing ESL and job development (Riney & Seufert-Bosco, 1985). It now serves newly-arrived immigrants (largely from Latin America) as well as refugees of various nationalities (Cambodian, Vietnamese, Laotian, Ethiopian, etc.), many with little or no previous formal education.

The competency-based curriculum used at REEP has learning objectives which are intended to meet the immediate language needs of its students. It is a functional approach which incorporates grammatical forms and is structured around lifeskills needed by an individual to function outside the classroom. It is a two-track system, each track consisting of four proficiency levels. The lower, A-track is intended for students with five years of education or less in their native country, and includes a "Literacy" level. The B-track is for other students with more than five years of education. Sometimes students are transfered from one track to another. Informally learned literacy skills in a native language are sometimes more valuable to students in making progress in ESL than previous experiences in formal education.

Each level covers a spiral cycle of 8 to 11 topics. Thus, in higher levels the same topics may be recycled but requiring different, more difficult tasks. For each topic there are tasks, language functions, and corresponding structures. These are indexed to the larger lifeskill toward which the student is working (3). The most important "key" performance objectives are formally evaluated. Evaluation is criterion-referenced which means that students are not rated in relation to one another but rather according to how they perform on a task against a set standard for their level (6).

In a twelve-week cycle, 8 topics are taught at the literacy level: per-

sonal identification, housing/classroom, time/weather, money/banking, transportation, clothing/consumerism, food and health. "Literacy Enabling Objectives" which focus on the mechanics of reading are also considered part of the program but the teacher decides by what method these prerequisite skills are developed, as well as how they are worked in to the performance of tasks which are assessed.

As an example of how all these things work together, take for instance one topic: money/banking. Key performance objectives for this topic are: 1)Given coins and bills, identify them by name and value; 2)Given cash and price tags for amounts under $10.00, produce the correct amounts (36). Language functions are: Identifying objects, reporting descriptive information about price, expressing needs, and asking for clarification. Structures include: Simple Present of BE and Regular Verbs, and Yes/No Questions (37). Some related literacy "enabling objectives might be: counting objects, saying the name of a printed numeral, matching printed numerals to spoken ones, copying numerals, taking number dictation, matching quantities of money to written notations of the amount (29).

The flexibility of the CBE design can be seen in various aspects of the REEP curriculum. Topics have been chosen which are thought to be basic lifeskills of newly-arrived non-English-speaking students. Some educators have been very critical of CBE programs. Wallerstein believes that offering "functional lifeskills" to these students is equivalent to "teaching them to fit into a prescribed role without questioning it" (qtd. in "Forum" 1985,51). This is teaching them to be resigned to a low status position in U.S. society. Wallerstein has suggested that the topics of a curriculum must be drawn from the students themselves so that ESL literacy is not a domesticating experience for them. The REEP program has tried to be sensitive to the expressed needs of its students by setting up opportunities for faculty and students to dialogue

about strengths and weaknesses of the program. Also, with the chosen topics, more or less time could be focused on particular topics depending on the students' needs.

The grammatical structures too could be reorganized if, for example, Pienemann & Johnston were able to define interlingual stages and provide a "learnable" grammatical syllabus. Also, the literacy objectives could be pursued according to top-down, bottom-up, or eclectic techniques, if reliable evidence can be given supporting the value of meaning-centered versus form-centered approaches.

The REEP curriculum is flexible to the needs of students and adaptable to growing research knowlege in the field of SLA largely because no texts, materials, or methods are prescribed. The tasks <u>are</u> prescribed and various relevant texts are offered as resources, but real situations, simulations and real objects are used as frequently as possible.

The flexibility which the CBE program at REEP offers to teachers carries with it a great responsibility. Texts, lesson plans, and workbooks cannot be adopted in a wholesale way because they are not usually constructed along the lines of task orientation, the picture/symbol content may not be appropriate for preliterates (as mentioned earlier), or the grammatical content may be "out of synch" with what is known of the natural sequences of ESL learners.

The burden of finding or preparing appropriate materials for individual classes then falls to the teachers. The REEP program has combatted this problem by assembling a huge library of textbooks and teacher resources, audio-visuals, and realia. Teachers are encouraged to keep abreast of current developments in theory and research, to share this information as well as practical techniques with others on the staff. Faculty members review newly-published materials for their usefulness and applicability to the curriculum.

Within the flexibility of a CBE program, decisions must still be made immediately as to what approach is taken to the literacy skills component of the curriculum. One suggestion is an adaptation of the approach used by instructors at the Alemany Community College for their multi-level, multi-language adult literacy classes.

Batchelor, Weiss & Wigfield describe the college's approach which contains lessons consisting of six parts: 1) Form filling, 2) Dialogue, 3) Reading passage, 4) Cloze exercise, 5) Opposites, and 6) Spelling structure with its relationship to sound and/or composition of a note. In these lessons the grammatical structures are limited to simple ones and high frequency vocabulary words are used as well as words chosen for their spelling structures (1978,157).

A modified version of their approach could be built on short dialogues constructed so as to relate directly to topics being covered in the CBE curriculum. The dialogues would be based on the teacher's knowledge of the life situations of individuals in the particular class. This would mean that such dialogues could not be standardized entirely and would have to be written consistently to the level of a particular class and to the interests and needs of its particular students. Further, these dialogues could not be written far in advance. The grammatical structure of the phrases should resemble the grammar of the interlingual stage of the students or at least the grammar of native speaker "foreigner talk", which is likely to be more comprehensible to non-native speakers than regular speech (Long, 1984,114-15). Language functions and vocabulary items could be limited to those immediately demonstratable and necessary for key tasks specified by the curriculum.

Practice in letter formation could draw on letters used frequently in vocabulary found in the dialogue. Phonics lessons could be drawn from manipulating known words from the dialogue to create new, real, familiar words with similar spelling/sound patterns. Lessons focused on grammatical form could

also be drawn from the kernal of such dialogues.

Students could practice reading and copying the dialogues alone. Later, the entire group could practice reading them aloud chorally and in pairs. Oral drills could come from the dialogue forms as well as reading passages which are constructed so as to recycle and repeat in narrative form the vocabulary, structures, and content of the dialogues. With sufficient exposure to this content, prediction of new text should be possible.

This approach is just one possibility. As mentioned before, "experts" are not in any kind of agreement about approach. Whichever theories are adopted for the purpose of syllabus and approach to teaching, the curriculum must be flexible enough to make use of them. In the future more research must be aimed at a specifically adult illiterate group. Wigfield is one of the few educators and materials designers who is calling for this kind of research. The questions he is asking must be answered by the research community if educators are to make responsible choices. Wigfield asks:

> Is there any research on lateralization in adult second language literacy?...What eye movement research is applicable to ESL adult literacy?...Is there evidence that students transfer words learned in reading to their oral vocabulary? What happens to verbal mediation in ESL literacy?...Can we talk about 'instrumental' versus 'integrative' motivation in ESL literacy? What are the major variables that affect speed in learning to read a second language? (1978,5).

Wigfield's questions are directly to the point. He also decries the fact that very few universities are even addressing the issue of education for this group. It appears to me that the field is presently wide open and deserves a great deal of attention.

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